THE UNIVERSAL FELLOWSHIP OF METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES

# ALERT

News from the UFMCC
on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment.

January 1994

# Rev. Pieters Meets With U.S. President at White House Breakfast

**By Rev. Steve Pieters, Field Director of UFMCC AIDS Ministry**

Rev. Elder Troy Perry tells me that I am the first representative of UFMCC to speak personally with a President of the United States in office. But I could feel everyone in the Universal Fellowship, particularly those of us living with HIV/AIDS, walking into the White House with me on Monday morning, November 29, 1993. As I sat next to President Clinton during the prayer breakfast I also felt the presence of Rev. Ron Russell-Coons, Rev. Emmett Watkins, Rev. Robert Pierce, and so many others from my "parish" of clergy and lay leaders who have died from the complications of HIV/AIDS.

The President listened carefully to what I had to say. He even took notes. He held my hand when we prayed, and he gave me a big hug at the end of the meeting. While this meeting was an intensely exciting experience for me personally, I was particularly aware of being a representative for tens of thousands of people. When the President held my hand in prayer, he was holding the hands of the members of UFMCC. When he hugged me, he was embracing all people who are living with HIV and AIDS.

The White House had called with the invitation November 23. Buck Buckingham, the White House aide with whom I spoke, told me that a list of over 100 religious leaders, including the heads of Communion of many denominations and faith groups (among them UFMCC), had been considered for a breakfast on World AIDS Day. However, the President asked that only twelve people who are doing the work of AIDS Ministry meet with him, prior to World AIDS Day.

I wasn't sure who else was being invited, but when I arrived at the Appointments Gate of the White House at 8 a.m., I discovered that I was the only invited guest living with HIV or AIDS. I also represented the AIDS National Interfaith Network, as Secretary of their Board of Directors. I was not the only homosexual at the table, but I was the only one who came out to the President during the breakfast, or who spoke about gay concerns regarding HIV/AIDS.

The other guests were Rabbi Joseph Edelheit of Temple Israel, Minneapolis, MN; Ms. Trudy James of the Regional AIDS Interfaith Network of Little Rock, AR; Rev. Phil Jamison of the Presbyterian AIDS Network; Rev. Ted Karpf of the National Episcopal AIDS Coalition; Rev. Jon Lacey of the Disciples AIDS Ministry Network; Rev. Bill McGill of P.E.A.C.E./Fellowship of Faith; Bishop Fritz Mutti of the United Methodist Church; Pr. Michael Pozar of the Lutheran AIDS Network; Ms. Pernessa Seele of Balm of Gilead, Inc. and the Harlem Day of Prayer for the End of AIDS; Rev. Altagracia Perez, of the Episcopal Church's ministry to street gangs in Chicago; Monsignor Russell Dillard of St. Augustine's Catholic Church in Washington, D.C.; and Rev. Ed Dobson of Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, MI.

After clearing security, we were ushered into the main hallway on the ground floor of the White House, where we

*(continued on page 3)*

# "Quite Enough Hope"

## By Rev. Randy Lester, pastor of MCC of the Central Coast, Grover City, CA

*[Editor's Note: This homily was delivered at an Ecumenical AIDS Mass in October in San Luis Obispo, CA, USA.]*

As we gather tonight for this sacred moment in time, this, the fourth Annual AIDS Mass, our fears and questions and concerns once again resurface with a new intensity, an all-too-familiar numbness, freshly heightened grief. Day after day, month after month, year after year, we still dare to ask, "How many more will make a premature exit from this life to the next? How many more funeral and memorial services will we have to attend? How many more of the world's lovely and unlovely will we lose before year's end? And...how much more can our hearts and minds endure?"

Last week I received a letter from AmFAR — the American Foundation for AIDS Research. It contained a chilling statistic about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, that read, "This terrible disease is killing an American every eleven minutes." Think about that. During the hour or so that we'll spend together, another five people will have taken their last breaths. The number of families, friends, co-workers, and communities affected is unfathomable.

I am an ordained minister with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. In the past seven years, we have lost many male pastors. We have also lost many members of our congregations, as well as members of the community-at-large. Some of our pastors have either left the ministry or stepped down from their positions. Dealing with three to five deaths each week is simply too much to bear for a short while, let alone an extended period of time. One of our deceased clergy, the Rev. Ron Russell-Coons, preached a sermon for an ecumenical gathering in San Francisco entitled, "We Are the Body of Christ and We Have AIDS." The painful reality is that these words hit home for many of us in this room — no matter what our denomination, our orientation, our age, political affiliation, race, or ethnicity. Each of us has, in one way or another, been touched by the virus. Some of us know the shock and anger of a positive HIV test. Some of us know the blessing as well as the challenge of holding another in our arms as they are finally and forever released from the agonies of body, mind and spirit. Some of us know only about "them," the people "out there." Some of us may even harbor feelings of fear that tell us "these people got what they deserved." In the words of some, "No tears for queers!"

In spite of the statistics and the heartache, in spite of unfulfilled dreams and untold rejection, we DO have reason to hold on to hope. You see, our very presence here tonight makes a positive and affirming statement about our intentionality in being a part of the world's healing. It is your woundedness and my brokenness that offer a deeper and richer level of human understanding, relating, caring, ministering than may have been evident before this health crisis. Can you imagine what things would be like today if AIDS had never existed? Think of the countless lives that wouldn't have had to experience the horrors of this disease. Think of the marches that wouldn't have been necessary, the walk-a-thons that wouldn't have been needed, the fundraisers that wouldn't have been required. As a new century draws closer, I believe AIDS will not only be seen as a needless tragedy in human history, but that time will reveal how active and present the comforting and sustaining presence of Jesus Christ has been throughout the epidemic: the strong, yet tender presence that's as evident this evening as it's been for the past ten years. In real and tangible ways, we have witnessed eternal rest replacing the confusion of dementia; spiritual insight replacing physical blindness; Christian love and compassion replacing fear and ignorance.

Many of us were raised on stories from the Bible; i.e., accounts of God's powerful presence throughout history and herstory. We also know of the on-going testimony of the faith community which confirms the faithfulness of the Great Physician. And yet, in the midst of our anguish, we often forget that healing happens in more than one way. There is instantaneous and miraculous healing. There is healing as process. And lastly, there is complete healing in death. Death, the precise moment when AIDS, cancer, car accidents, diabetes, drive-by shooting, etc., are no more. And I am convinced that those among us who have dared to care in Jesus' name will be counted as faithful servants of God. This is an example of grace, both human and divine — as gay men, bisexual women, hemophiliacs, prostitutes, hustlers, I.V. drug users, and each of us respond faithfully to the uncompromising affection of God in Christ, Christ in us.

The hope and healing we offer our world is based on nothing less than compassion. And what does compassion mean? It simply means "passion with." Each of us is passionate with one thing or another; a particular cause, a sport, a hobby. Demonstrating our "passion with" is a way of saying we have given ourselves permission to care deeply and intimately about those whose bodies, minds, and spirits are aching and breaking. It means that we identify with the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness of those living with life-threatening diseases. It means that we have chosen to be intentional about living God's love by the things we say and do.

Siblings in Christ, I submit to you that there is quite enough hope, quite enough love, and quite enough power to chase away any gloom. The outstretched hand of Jesus reaches out to us. As does the outstretched heart of our care-giving Messiah. The unconditional love of our Great God reaches beyond all human boundaries to envelop and embrace, touch and heal, preserve and sustain. Jesus is very much a part of our tears, our fears, our joys and our sorrows. And...Jesus is in this very room.

[Rev. Lester signed the song "In This Very Room" at the conclusion of his message.] ▼

## Rev. Dan Mahoney
## 1952 - 1993

We are deeply saddened to report the death of Rev. Dan Mahoney, who was featured in the November 1993 issue of ALERT. His life partner, Patrick Weisenberger, was with him at the Chris Brownlie Hospice when Rev. Mahoney went home to his "sweet precious Jesus" on December 13, 1993. The funeral service was held December 18 at MCC Los Angeles, California. Interment will be in the columbarium at MCC of the Rockies in Denver, CO after the new year.

## Rev. Pieters Meets President Clinton

*(continued from page 1)*

checked each other's red ribbons, and wandered among the open rooms. Someone said, "There he is!" Clinton walked into the hallway from his morning jog, in his sweatsuit and baseball cap. He disappeared into an elevator, and we were ushered upstairs into the State Dining Room, where they had a harpist playing Broadway show tunes.

Butlers served orange juice and coffee, while we checked out the seating chart. At first, I couldn't find my name until someone said, "Look, Steve, they have you seated next to the President!" Kristine Gebbie, the new AIDS Policy Coordinator (or AIDS "tsar"), entered and greeted each of us.

The President and Vice-President entered and shook each of our hands. They were followed closely by a band of photographers, as well as someone with a videocamera. We were ushered into the Family Dining Room, a more intimate room not normally open to the public. Not only was I seated at the President's right hand, but on my other side was Kristine Gebbie, and across the table from me was Vice-President Gore.

While we ate breakfast before the formal meeting started, (fruit cup, scrambled and poached eggs, bacon, sausage, and sweet rolls) I had the opportunity to speak to the President one on one. I did not have to explain to him about UFMCC: he seemed to know all about it. I told him that we have lost nearly 1/4 of our denominational membership to AIDS, and we have an estimated 1/4 of our current members who are living with HIV/AIDS. I told him about MCC Washington, D.C., whose senior pastor, Rev. Larry Uhrig, has been very sick with AIDS, but who is still preaching. I urged him to visit MCC Washington. I thanked him for including UFMCC, and encouraged him to continue to include the religious institutions of the communities most affected.

The President, who had been briefed about each one of us, was very curious about the phenomenon of longterm survival, and my remission in particular. We had quite a discussion about healing. I told him how much "Amazing Grace" means to me, because I was blind from the toxic side effects of an experimental drug, and now I can see. The President said, "You're a real miracle. How do you explain it?" I said, "I give the glory to God, and my doctor says it was the experimental drug, suramin." I explained that suramin is no longer used in the fight against HIV, because of the toxic side effects, and talked about the importance of continuing to expand medical research as well as education, which at this point is the only effective vaccine on the horizon.

***...action creates hope.***
**I asked the President to give us reason to have hope by taking action.**

When we finished breakfast, he gave each one of us the chance to speak while he took notes. Rev. Dan Mahoney had asked me to tell the President, "We're dying, and we're tired of the dying," and that's how I started. I told him we need hope in order to carry on. I said that I had discovered as a person living with AIDS that I felt most hopeless when I felt helpless. When I began to discover that there was a lot I could do to help myself live with AIDS, I began to create hope: action creates hope. I asked the President to give us reason to have hope by taking action.

I asked him to lift the immigration ban on persons with HIV, which I pointed out is inconsistent with the principles upon which this country was founded. I asked him to increase efforts at education based on facts, not fears. I asked him to demonstrate his concern by allowing himself to be seen embracing people with AIDS, not just babies with AIDS, but adults with AIDS. I finished by quoting the ancient Native American saying, "'The quality of life is not measured by the length of life, but by the fullness with which we enter into each present moment.' In this moment, Mr. President, we need hope, and you can give it to us by taking action, by bringing AIDS off the back burner."

During the course of the meeting, we managed to cover just about every issue of concern that comes up in discussions of HIV/AIDS. Most issues came up through participants' sharing of their own stories and their ministries. I was very impressed with Clinton's command of the issues, his willingness to hear our anger and frustration, his intention to bring AIDS "off the back-burner," and his efforts to find points of consensus among us.

After each person had a chance to speak, the President thanked us and said that he was very pleased with the diversity of theological backgrounds represented at the breakfast. He pointed out that on his left side he had the representative of the Religious Right, and on his right, he had the representative from MCC. As he clapped Rev. Dobson and me on the back, he joked that a picture should be taken of the three of us so he could send it to Rush Limbaugh. (There were no photographers present at the breakfast itself.)

The President rose to signal the end of the meeting. People gathered around him and handed him resources from their AIDS ministries. He kept handing the pamphlets, books, and videos to butlers who disappeared with them. I gave him my book, *I'm Still Dancing*, and the pamphlet, "Spiritual Strength for Survival." He held onto them, and when he left, he had them in his hand.

I invited both President Clinton and Kristine Gebbie to our General Conference in Atlanta in 1995. While the President was not able to respond, Ms. Gebbie gave an immediate "yes."

As others were saying goodbye to the President, I noticed the Vice-President standing off by himself, not talking to anyone. So I went over and engaged him in conversation. He told me he had been very moved by the breakfast meeting, and that he saw a connection between AIDS and the environment. I offered, "It's often been said that the earth has AIDS." At that point, President Clinton came over and said they had Helmut Kohl on hold, and they had to go. They disappeared into the elevator.

Afterwards, many of us met with Kristine Gebbie for a "debriefing." Part of the process was an opportunity to tell an aide to Dee Dee Meyers, the White House Press Secretary, what had transpired, so that she could report on it at her daily press conference. Ms. Gebbie indicated that she felt very

*(continued on page 4)*

# Open Arms MCC Honored At Northeast District AIDS Ministry Fundraiser

*Rev. Cathy Elliott receiving the proclamation*

Open Arms MCC in Rochester, NY, recently received a proclamation from the city for "its inclusive community efforts to spread peace, fellowship, and spiritual sustenance." A plaque was given to Rev. Cathy Elliott, pastor of Open Arms MCC, at a benefit concert for AIDS Ministry within the Northeast District of UFMCC. The concert took place during the recent Northeast District Conference in Rochester.

The Northeast District has been doing an AIDS benefit concert at their District Conference for the last 3 or 4 years, according to Rev. Elliott. The church which hosts the conference each year is responsible for organizing the concert. This year, the concert featured local gay/lesbian singing groups, including the Rochester Freedom Singers, the Rochester Gay Men's Chorus, and the Rochester Community Chorus. This concert was the most successful fundraiser yet in the Northeast District.

The concert was open to the public, and Rev. Elliott reports a "packed house." The concert raised over $3,000, and Rev. Elliott says that the money is still coming in. The event took place at the Downtown United Presbyterian Church, which was the center of controversy in that denomination over their desire to hire an openly lesbian pastor, Rev. Jane Spahr.

The funds will provide grants for AIDS Ministry projects of local congregations and ministries with the Northeast District. Last year, the money was given to assist persons living with AIDS and their families who are in financial crisis. This year, part of the money will be given to MCC New York to translate their HIV/AIDS coloring book for children into Spanish.

Rev. Elliott is very proud of the concert's success, which she feels came partly from all the Rochester area gay singing groups coming together for the first time. Also, Open Arms MCC did a great deal of publicity for the event, primarily through print ads.

The proclamation from the city of Rochester cites Open Arms MCC not only for its inclusive ministry, but for collecting food to assist AIDS Rochester's Food Bank, for organizing and co-sponsoring Rochester's first AIDS Interfaith Worship Service, and for helping to establish the Greater Rochester AIDS Interfaith Network (GRAIN). ▼

# Rev. Pieters Meets President Clinton

*(continued from page 3)*

positively about the meeting, as did all of us who were invited guests.

Ms. Gebbie outlined her approach to AIDS policy coordination: the first item on her list is research, for which $1.3 billion has been allocated. In terms of treatment, she sets great hope in the new Health Care Reform package, because she believes it will particularly benefit people with HIV/AIDS. In education and prevention, she wants to see the country "moving out of platitudes into community-specific plans." Finally, she wants to see a national commitment to breaking the denial that exists around HIV/AIDS.

When I thanked her for including MCC in this meeting, she told me that she had absolutely insisted on it. She explained that she had received much of her earliest understanding of AIDS issues from Rev. Gary Wilson, then the pastor of MCC Portland, OR.

On World AIDS Day, President Clinton made a speech on AIDS which made the news reports because of a person with AIDS who interrupted the President with a litany of accusations. Earlier in the speech, in a portion only seen on C-SPAN, President Clinton talked about the breakfast two days previously. He said that among the group was a Methodist Bishop from Kansas (Bishop Mutti) who had lost two sons to AIDS, and "Rev. Steve Pieters, who has been living with AIDS for over a decade, one of America's longest survivors, explaining how he stays alive through hope and his own faith."

It was an amazing experience to hear the President of the United States talk about me in a speech. It was even more amazing to have the opportunity to break bread with him and talk with him about the issues closest to my heart. As much of a "peak experience" as this was for me personally, I was constantly aware that this was UFMCC's meeting with the President. This was an opportunity for persons with HIV/AIDS to dialogue with him.

It gives me hope that finally, after 12 years and two administrations' neglect, we have a President who is genuinely concerned about AIDS, and who listens carefully to the people most directly affected. I was distressed that in the articles about the meeting that appeared in the two Washington newspapers, MCC's presence was not mentioned, nor was the fact that there was a person with AIDS present. The Washington Times emphasized the Evangelical presence, and featured quotes from the Episcopal, Catholic, Methodist, and Evangelical representatives.

They cannot erase the fact that the Clinton Administration has brought UFMCC to the table. ▼

## ALERT

**ALERT is a monthly newsletter containing information on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment. The Editor is Rev. Dr. A. Stephen Pieters. For more information, please write: ALERT, 5300 Santa Monica Blvd., #304, Los Angeles, CA 90029.**